

## **Addressing the politics of location: strategies in feminist epistemology and their relevance to research undertaken from a feminist perspective**

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### **1. Introduction**

Over the past twenty years feminist epistemologists, philosophers of science and other participants in 'successor epistemology' projects have uncovered the systematic androcentrism and partiality of much authoritative knowledge. Their consideration of how our social location systematically shapes what we know and how, and how 'knowledge is always *relative* to (i.e. a perspective *on*, a standpoint *in*) specifiable circumstances' [Code 1993: 40], bridges Sandra Harding's persistent taxonomy of a reconstructed, contextualised or post-positivist empiricism, feminist standpoint theories, and post-modern epistemologies and genealogies. Thus Lorraine Code's plea that the structural circumstances of an epistemic location must be empirically specified because of their constitutive role in making and evaluating knowledge claims, is in agreement with the analytical focus of standpoint theorists on group locations within hierarchical relations of power and their effects on situated knowledges [Collins 1997]. It is also consistent with the post-modern project of re-conceiving epistemology as genealogy, and engaging in 'linguistic, historical, political, and psychological inquiries into forms of knowledge construction and conflict ... [which] include investigations into the philosopher's own desire and place within particular social locations and discourses'. [Flax 1992: 457-8].

Donna Haraway [1988/1991] explicitly links these epistemological and political concerns to the notion of a politics of location when she states 'politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims' [Haraway 1991: 195]. Rosi Braidotti posits that 'the notion of the politics of location is one of the epistemological foundations of feminist theory and gender knowledge' [Braidotti 2003: 1].

While few students or researchers in gender studies in the Czech Republic would dispute the social perspectivity of knowledge on a theoretical level, most fail to incorporate and address the politics of their location in their own research practice. In their attempts to enter the academic community, graduate students in my courses on feminist methodologies continue to qualify their research procedures and findings as factual, objective and divorced from personal values and interests, feminist or otherwise, and write themselves out of their final projects. Researchers in gender studies who I have worked with tend to assume common expertise in and consensus about feminist methodology. As time is always pressing, practical methodical questions usually take precedent over a thorough inquiry into the researchers' own epistemic locations, agency and convictions.

This persistent theory-practice split is of course far from being specific to Central Europe. Jane Flax has explored how invested North American feminists are in received notions of scientificity. She argued that 'a grounding in science', its assumed universal truths and scientific methods, wards off bias, prejudice and partiality and 'preserves the innocence of the social scientist' [Flax 1992: 449]. Callaway [1992] has shown how the reflections of anthropologists on particular,

personal and embodied encounters and emotions in fieldwork, which contradict prevailing conventions for conducting research and open up the researcher's process of constructing knowledge and understanding, have historically been relegated to personal diaries or published in novels under pseudonyms. More generally, training in self-reflexivity has not become an integral part of scientific education and research practice. This deficiency is exasperated by the fact that some introductory texts on feminist philosophies of science omit discussing the epistemologically formative effects of location and positionality [e.g. Duran 1998], and feminist researchers sometimes deploy the term 'politics of location' as if it is self-explanatory [e.g. Anthias 2002].

Against this background, in this chapter I first seek to unfold the conceptual dimensions of the politics of location, a concept that has travelled from North American to European and Australian contexts of reception and application, and from the humanities to the social sciences and back to philosophy. Generally speaking I take a location's 'politics' to refer to its effects and consequences for making knowledge claims. I will outline the concept's psychosocial and epistemological dimensions and specify some of their significant categories. Next, I use an essay by the Black British art critic Kobena Mercer [1991/1993] as an example of how a politics of location can be fruitfully addressed. Endorsing Longino's [1994] view that epistemology is practice rather than content, this exploration is motivated by the attempt to make insights of feminist epistemologies practically relevant for research undertaken from a feminist perspective. I shall argue that if location and positioning are epistemologically formative, then a research practice that systematically attends to the ways that the power relations and emotional investments of the researcher work to discursively structure his or her knowledge claims, will yield more accountable outcomes. I will conclude by highlighting how the politics of location link to related (feminist) epistemological concerns, in particular to the politics of representation, feminist standpoint theories and dialogic epistemologies that aim to promote socially responsible epistemic agency.

## **2. Conceptual dimensions and categories of a feminist politics of location**

From its inception, the concept of a politics of location aimed at fostering reflection on and responsibility for how feminists act and know within the locations they inhabit, reproduce and transform. Over the last twenty years this concept has undergone a series of reformulations, modifications and specifications. The concept was coined in the mid-1980s by the North American poet, writer and feminist activist Adrienne Rich, and referred to the articulation and interrogation of her personal and socio-structural location – particularly the 'circumscribing nature of (her) whiteness' [Rich 1986: 219] – in the context of larger feminist politics and power relations. Rich acknowledges the writings of African-American and South American women and her travels to Nicaragua as prompting her to reflect on her North American location. She succinctly argued that 'a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, as a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create' [Rich 1986: 212]. Locations are positionings in time and space which have specific effects and consequences, or 'politics', that need to be analysed and historicised.<sup>1</sup> Structurally, a location is marked by parameters of social inequality such as gender,

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the notion of positionality, more than the related term position, is a relational term 'identifiable only within a (constantly moving) context' [Alcoff 1994 as cited in Kaplan 1996/2000: 178]. Yeatman argues that 'the idea of positioning is both relational and political: i.e., the positioning of a knowing subject is located within the time- and space-specific politics of particular relationships of contested domination' [Yeatman 1994: 190].

'race', class, religion, sexuality and geopolitical location and their attending subject positions of identification and disidentification, material conditions, privileges and feelings as well as 'conceptual resources ... to represent and interpret these relations' [Wylie 2003: 31].

From the outset Rich conceives the task of 'having to name the ground we're coming from, the conditions we have taken for granted' as a process and 'struggle to keep moving, a struggle for accountability' [Rich 1986: 211]. This struggle is material and embodied. It begins with oneself as a particular body-subject. Rich states that feminists need 'to reconnect [their] thinking and speaking with the body of this particular living human individual' [Rich 1986:213]; but they also need to address global relations of power such as 'the weight of the United States of North America [on South America], its military forces, its vast appropriations of money, its mass media' [Rich 1986: 220]. Caren Kaplan [1996/2000] aptly characterises Rich's strategy as 'a kind of decentring through centring, a self-conscious review and rejection of the power of dominant feminist centrality' [Kaplan 2000: 165].<sup>2</sup>

African-American feminist writer bell hooks emphasises the necessity of material displacement for rethinking one's location in shifting power relations, albeit from the point of view of marginality rather than centrality: 'Moving [out of our place], we confront the realities of choice and location' [hooks 1990: 146]. hooks speaks of the pain of having been 'made "Other"' [hooks 1990: 151] and confronting 'silences, inarticulateness' within herself, that made it a 'personal struggle to name that location from which I come to voice - that space of my theorising' [hooks 1990: 147]. For her, a location is also a theoretical space and a space of oppositional agency that she calls the margin. The margin is both a site of oppression and a 'site of radical possibility, a space of resistance' [hooks 1990: 149].

Earlier, South Asian-born postcolonial theorist Chandra Mohanty articulated the epistemological dimension of the politics of location. She addressed the multiplicity and dynamism of locations that a feminist inhabits at any given moment, and the self-definitions, experiences of the self and modes of knowledge that arise from them. Mohanty uses the term the politics of location to refer 'to the historical, geographical, cultural, psychic and imaginative boundaries which provide the ground for political definition and self-definition for contemporary US feminists' [Mohanty 1987/1992: 74]. Like hooks, she argued that 'my location forces and enables specific modes of reading and knowing the dominant' and proposed that the 'struggles I choose to engage in are ... an intensification of these modes of knowing' [Mohanty 1992: 89]. Speaking of a non-linear 'temporality of struggle', Mohanty characterised her political engagement as 'an insistent, simultaneous, non-synchronous process characterised by multiple locations' [Mohanty 1992: 87], an ongoing 'movement *between* cultures, languages and complex configurations of meaning and power' [Mohanty 1992: 89] in which she locates and defines herself. With reference to Kaplan, she describes the historicising of the self as a 'continual re-territorialisation through struggle, that allows me a paradoxical continuity of self, mapping and transforming my political location' [ibid.]. As Clifford observes, a 'location is thus concretely a series of locations and encounters, travels within diverse, but limited spaces' [Clifford 1989: 182].

This focus on multiple locations and actual or potential oppositional agency makes the concept particularly attractive for theorists of post-colonialism and

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<sup>2</sup> More critically Kaplan notes that Rich failed to simultaneously interrogate global inequalities between feminists and inequalities between white women and women of colour in the US. 'Locked into the conventional opposition of the global-local nexus as well as the binary construction of Western and non-Western ... [s]he deconstructs the equalisations of "global feminism" ... by homogenising the location of "North American feminist"' [Kaplan 2000: 166].

diaspora. British psychologist Avtar Brah, for example, explores the politics of location in the context of migration 'as locationality in contradiction' [Brah 1996: 180]: migrants and members of diaspora simultaneously experience situatedness in 'multi-axial locationality' [Brah 1996: 205] and engage in 'movements across shifting cultural, religious and linguistic boundaries' [Brah 1996: 204]. Lata Mani, referring to Mohanty's conception of the politics of location, argued that 'the relation between experience and knowledge is now seen to be one not of correspondence but fraught with history, contingency and struggle' [Mani 1989/1992: 308]. Like Mani Brah holds that the epistemological outcomes of such contradictory locationality cannot be known in advance. 'Diasporic or border positionality does not in itself assure a vantage point of privileged insight into and understanding of relations of power, although it does create a space in which experiential mediations may intersect in ways that render such understandings more readily accessible' [Brah 1996: 207]. As Elspeth Probyn remarked, 'living with contradictions does not necessarily enable one to speak of them' [Probyn 1990: 182].

Drawing on the rich meanings of location and locality, Probyn gives further specifications of the link between one's psychosocial location and epistemological issues. Probyn agrees with other feminist theorists that the politics of location engages matters of where we are and what we experience (which she calls the ontological), as well as how we come to know (the epistemological), a process that has both spatial and temporal significance. Inspired perhaps by the fact that location refers to the act or process of locating that connotes, among other things, 'to find or fix the place of especially in a sequence' [Merriam Webster Dictionary 2003], location in Probyn's scheme refers to 'the methods by which one comes to locate sites of research. Through location knowledges are ordered into sequences which are congruent with previously established categories of knowledge' [Probyn 1990: 178]. In this dual process of locating sites of knowledge and rendering them into sequences of categories of knowledge, some forms of (subaltern) knowers and knowledges are silenced and discredited while others are legitimised. Accounting for the politics of location 'describes [these] epistemological manoeuvres' [Probyn 1990: 184]. This description lifts 'the veil of objectivity, which in a scientific model works to erase the researcher's physical and institutional presence from the scene to be studied' [Probyn 1990: 182], and recognises the researcher's affectivity with respect of the ideological workings of what he or she studies. It is a 'mode of working between and among sanctioned categories of knowledge' [Probyn 1990: 185] and aims at 'bringing to light the submerged conditions that silence others and the other of ourselves' [Probyn 1990: 186].<sup>3</sup>

In her work on nomadic subjectivity, Rosi Braidotti [1994] draws together some of the aspects of a politics of location outlined above, in particular the idea of locating the self as an embodied practice and process that emerges and is transformed in struggle. Haraway claims that '[b]ecause feminist embodiment resists fixation and is insatiably curious about the webs of differential positing... location is about vulnerability; location resists the politics of closure' [Haraway 1991: 196]. According to Braidotti, the politics of location refers to 'the practice of decoding – expressing and sharing in language the conditions of possibility of one's own political

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<sup>3</sup> In subsequent work Probyn has distinguished the ontological aspect of the self or 'the ways in which we go about our everyday lives' [Probyn 1993: 1] from the epistemological understandings of the self defined as 'a mode of theory that problematises the material conditions of those practices' (ibid.). Probyn argues that 'the ontological [moments of experience] must be met with an epistemological analysis' [Probyn 1993: 4]. Carl Mclean has outlined how the distinction between the ontological and epistemological has helped him to conceptualise a Black male-identified feminist location as a process of reflexivity and ongoing introspection. Such introspection addresses 'difference via experience as a site for deep theoretical elaboration' [Mclean 2002: 51] and seeks to account for 'the multiplicitous [sic] desires and discourses that run through a theorised and lived sense of experience' [Mclean 2002: 50].

and theoretical choices. Accountability and positionality go together' [Braidotti 1994: 168]. Like Mohanty and Brah, she draws attention to the construction of locations at the micro and macro-levels [Braidotti 2003], and like Probyn she highlights the 'importance of accounting for one's investments ... [and] the level of unconscious desire and consequently of imaginary relation to the very material conditions that structure our existence' [Braidotti 1994: 168].

At the same time, feminist theorists have criticised post-modern theorists such as Braidotti and Haraway for not locating some of their own key philosophical claims. Sara Ahmed [2003], for example, has recently argued that Braidotti's statement that we have already become nomadic subjects detaches 'we' from particular bodies as well as histories of mobility and dwelling, and is neither located nor locatable. With respect to Braidotti's later work she also accuses her of failing to show how specific differences come into being and get embedded in epistemological practices. Similarly, Haraway has been criticised for equating Chicanas (women of mixed Spanish, Indian and African descent) with 'cyborgs (creatures who transcend, confuse or destroy boundaries). By uncritically affirming their marginal and contradictory locations and 'cyborg identities', Haraway obfuscates the concrete limiting effects of the social locations that Chicanas inhabit, and does little to assist the analysis of how experiences are linked to specific 'social facts' [Moya 1997: 132].

In order to combat a recurrent sense of the programmatic nature and abstraction in formulations of a politics of location evident in some of the passages cited above, I suggest the following conceptual differentiation. As an analytical concept, the politics of location generally denotes a practice of specifying the effects of one's location on one's knowledge claims. This practice first refers to reflecting on and interrogating one's personal and structural location(s), which I call its *psychosocial dimension*. The inquiry along the psychosocial dimension addresses five conceptual categories in so far as they are relevant to the specific subject matter under investigation, namely the knowing subject's location in terms of intersecting parameters of social inequality at the micro and macro-level; (changing) subject positions (that have become available, for example, as a result of changing gender relations); her desires and investments; movements and struggles; and experiences. Second, the practice of specifying one's location involves investigating one's epistemological manoeuvres, which I call the concept's *epistemological dimension*. Inquiry along the epistemological dimension addresses four conceptual categories, namely the available conceptual resources; the choice of authorised and/or discounted sites of knowledge; the use of established categories of knowledge and their relations and orderings; and conditions that silence 'the other', including the other in oneself. For all categories the investigator has to specify how they link to his or her psychosocial location.

Feminist theorists have characterised both kinds of investigations into the politics of location, the psychosocial and the epistemological, as the effort, struggle and process of working with and against one's privileges and marginalisation, desires and investments, a process which confronts the subject with her own vulnerability. Before I address some further conceptual clarifications, I would like to turn to a mode of inquiry that illustrates several key aspects of the psychosocial and epistemological dimensions of the politics of location.

### **3. Investigating desire and knowledge-making in an essay by Kobena Mercer**

In his rich and nuanced essay 'Looking for trouble', the Ghanaian-born cultural theorist Kobena Mercer reviews the artwork of Robert Mapplethorpe, particularly his photographs of Black male nudes, and his own earlier critique in the context of the (posthumous) politicisation of Mapplethorpe's work in the US, the AIDS pandemic and a wider debate about sexuality, desire and representation. The pictures under review frame, fragment and aestheticise Black men's bodies and body parts in ways that have been considered indecent. This has led to the withdrawal of public funding for some retrospective exhibitions of Mapplethorpe's work.

Mercer takes the recollection of his own embodied response to the photographs of Black men as a vantage point for an investigation of both his earlier position and his subsequent change of perspective. He recounts his first encounter with the pictures as follows:

'When a friend lent me his copy of the book ['Black Males'] it circulated between us as an illicit and highly problematic object of desire. We were fascinated by the beautiful bodies and drawn in by the pleasure of looking as we went over the repertoires of images again and again. We wanted to look, but we didn't always find what we wanted to see. We were, of course, disturbed by the racial dimension of the imagery and, above all, angered by the aesthetic objectification that reduced black male bodies to abstract visual "things", silenced in their own right as subjects and serving only to enhance the name of the white gay artist in the privileged world of art photography. In other words, we were stuck in an intransitive "structure of feeling", caught out in a liminal experience of textual ambivalence.' [Mercer 1993: 351]

Mercer thus describes his and his friend's opposing feelings of pleasure and dissatisfaction, fascination and anger, and simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards the images of the Black nudes. He then theoretically labels this experience as a structure of feeling and ambivalence. Ambivalence is a psychoanalytic concept coined by the psychiatrist E. Bleuler that denotes not vaguely conflicting feelings but the simultaneous presence of directly opposed emotions, attitudes, thoughts, or motivations that a person holds towards a person or object. Furthermore, sociologists have argued that ambivalences can be built into social structures as well. Ambivalences can therefore be conceived of as situated individual or institutional practices and performances that keep opposing valences alive, simultaneously expressing and enacting them [Lorenz-Meyer 2004]. The structure of feeling is a concept introduced by the cultural theorist R. Williams, referring to a structured lived social experience that is effective but not yet fully articulated, a 'cultural hypothesis' in artistic forms that precedes organised social forms.

Rather than explaining this theorisation, the subsequent interpretive moves are presented as 'attempt(s) to make sense of this experience' [ibid.]. In much the same way as the politics of location foster reflection, these moves provide insight into the relation between the experience and Mercer's ensuing knowledge claims, and ultimately his own location and positionality as a gay Black critic.

Mercer's earlier angry criticism of Mapplethorpe's images of Black men speaks of his commitment and investment in anti-racism; his criticism hinges on the established psychoanalytic category of 'fetishism' transposed to the context of race and racism. Drawing on feminist cultural theory on spectatorship and the male gaze, and also postcolonial and psychoanalytic theory, Mercer argued that Mapplethorpe's stylised images eroticised skin colour and reproduced racial stereotypes such as the enormous penis size of Black men. From a psychoanalytical perspective the pictures represented an 'aesthetic idealisation of racial Otherness that merely inverts and reverses the binary axis of the repressed fears of anxieties that are projected onto the other' [Mercer 1993: 353]. They ultimately revealed less about the men depicted in the photographs than they did about the fantasies of Mapplethorpe and a

racialised social order. By decontextualising and fixing the object in its place, Mercer argued, the images 'lubricate[d] the ideological reproduction of a "colonial fantasy" based on the desire for mastery and power over the racialised other' [Mercer 1993: 352].

However, when read against the description of his first emotional response, it becomes apparent that this criticism focuses merely on one side of his ambivalence, namely on Mercer's anger and repulsion. In effect, simultaneously opposing valences (ambi-valence) are not achieved but denied. Mercer's change of interpretation comes about when he accounts for his 'own subject position as a black gay reader in Mapplethorpe's text' [Mercer 1993:354], specifically his own fantasies and desire to look. Thus Mercer comes to acknowledge his dual contradictory identification not only with the Black men objectified in the pictures but also with the desiring viewer/subject. This acknowledgement leads to a series of reinterpretations of his own emotions as well as of Mapplethorpe's artistic strategy, his relation to established arts and the African-American models, and the broader politics of representation.

Thus, in light of his identification with the homoerotic spectator/author, Mercer's 'anger becomes intelligible as the expression of a certain aggressive rivalry' [ibid.] that was hard to acknowledge because it threatened his anti-racist stance. Acknowledging ambivalence also leads Mercer to reinterpret Mapplethorpe's visual strategy as effectively subversive. Mercer is able to appreciate Mapplethorpe's subversive intermixing of the figure of the idealised white fine art nude and denigrated 'low' animalistic Blackness in the depiction of Black men. This merging confronts the audience with their own racist stereotypes, and can 'unfix' and call into question the spectator's own subject and ideological positions. 'Mapplethorpe's work is powerful and disturbing precisely because it forces such acknowledgement of the ambivalence of identity and identification we actually inhabit in living with difference' [Mercer 1993: 355].

Furthermore, Mercer recognises Mapplethorpe's own marginality during his lifetime and his collaborative relations with the marginalised African-American models, of whose precarious socio-economic situation and early deaths from AIDS he was keenly aware. Like many feminist theorists, Mercer holds that the 'quotient of melanin' of both author and viewer cannot by itself determine the political meaning of the text, although a marginalised positionality can make critical viewings more readily accessible. He now argues that Mapplethorpe 'used his homosexuality as a creative resource with which to explore and open up a politics of marginality across the multiform relations of class, race, gender, and sexuality in which it is actually lived' [Mercer 1993: 357].

Having achieved ambivalence and moved towards a relational and dialogic reading of Mapplethorpe's work, Mercer also reflects on the effects and accountability of his own interpretations within a wider politics of representation, i.e. a debate on the conditions of possibility and the effects and consequences of representations of sexuality and 'race'. Here he critically addresses both the silence of Black critics with respect to the funding of Mapplethorpe's exhibitions that Mercer considers as endorsing a denial of homosexuality among African-Americans, as well as political appropriations of 'reductive "antiracist"' (and antisexist) criticisms like his own for repressive ends. In fact, members of the New Right had used not merely the argument of indecency but also 'offensiveness to minorities' as reasons to cancel Mapplethorpe's exhibitions or, as Mercer suggests, 'to promote a politics of coercion based on the denial of difference' [Mercer 1993: 359]. From the point of view of addressing the politics of location and the differences that different viewers bring to the images, Mapplethorpe's photographs resist closure: they 'do not provide an

unequivocal yes/no answer to the question of whether they reinforce or undermine commonplace racist stereotypes' [Mercer 1993: 354] – they can do both.

I take Mercer's intervention as an apt illustration of what can be gained by specifying the politics of location. It vividly exemplifies the feminist assertion that the knower is part of the matrix of what is known, and that the location from which we speak is one from which other voices, in this case also those within ourselves, may be sanctioned. Mercer's review illustrates some of the conceptual categories relevant for the psychosocial and epistemological investigations necessary to unfold the concept's analytical power. In particular it exemplifies the epistemic effects of a thorough investigation of the author's own subject position and identifications and disidentifications, his desires and investments, and his use of a single interpretive category (fetishism) versus the adoption of a dialogical mode of interpretation for specific knowledge claims about Mapplethorpe. At the same time it becomes apparent that not all categories of the politics of location outlined above need to be addressed. While Mercer invokes the history of white supremacy and focuses on the intersecting parameters of 'race' and sexuality, he does not address, for example, the history of his own material displacement and movements between Africa, Europe and North America, or other struggles that he is engaged in, which presumably have no direct bearing on his interpretation of Mapplethorpe's work.

In the final section I will look briefly at some commonalities and differences between a politics of location and related epistemological concepts, issues and theories, which promote socially responsible epistemic agency. This should serve to further delineate the concept's meanings and also to rebut possible criticism.

#### **4. Connections and differentiations between the politics of location and related epistemological concerns**

The epistemic practice of addressing the politics of one's location is closely connected to attending to the *politics of representation*. In the context of the so-called 'crisis of representation', a profound questioning of the one-to-one correspondence between concepts and phenomena attributed to realism, the politics of representation refers to the call for specifying the 'machineries and discourses that constitute the possibility of representing' [Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1997: 15] as well as the criteria by which representations function in the field of knowledge. 'Representation is never merely descriptive, it serves a regulatory and constitutive function' [ibid.]. Feminist theorists, such as Rich [1986] and Collins [1997] have noted that if feminists speak from a position of unrecognised specificity they are more likely to generalise and speak about 'all women' or to homogenise those conceived to be in the centre and those in the periphery. With respect to specifying regimes of representation, post-colonial theorists have suggested that researchers and writers pay more attention to their (self-) representation than to presenting the silenced other or, in Gayatri Spivak's words, the subaltern. 'To confront them is not to represent them but to learn to represent ourselves' [Spivak 1988: 288-9]. Spivak writes that we need to learn 'to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject' [Spivak 1988: 295].

One objection to such calls for more self-reflexivity and self-representation is the assertion that we cannot be our own mirrors. How can we account for our positions and desires if we are not immediately transparent to ourselves? Indeed there is a danger that reflexivity takes a confessional form that remains divorced from the actual process of research and knowledge generating. Like other kinds of texts, social scientific texts make available 'positionalities of meaning and desire' [de

Lauretis 1988 as cited in Moore 1994: 120] to both authors and readers. Using anthropologists as an example, Henrietta Moore [1994] draws attention to the fact that a 'self-critical, self-reflexive post-colonial stance' can become a self-congratulating gesture, concealing that the subject in the text is a construction that is not isomorphic with the author of the text.

I believe that there is no simple refutation of these insights. We can never be transparent to ourselves, and reflexivity is necessarily partial and mediated. But it is also true that producing 'unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims' [Haraway 1991: 191] the knowing subject is removed from the equation and her position cannot be interrogated. The practice of addressing the politics of representation and location should therefore not be abandoned, but must always be more than a gesture: one has to specify the enabling and limiting conditions of one's location(s) for making particular knowledge claims and, above all, spell out exactly how these conditions impact on what is known. As feminist researchers have observed, this inevitably includes confronting the 'simultaneous positions of subversion and complicity in relation to multiple layers of power ... implicated in the process of knowledge production' [Cheng 2001: 184]. This tends to involve the experience of vulnerability and the unsettling of the self, which can arise, for example, from being confronted with inequalities of power between researcher and research participants, or the latter's probing questions about the legitimacy and usefulness of the research that may contradict equalitarian feminist values and commitments. Addressing the politics of location signals a 'disinclination to provide closure to the dilemmas addressed' [Shildrick 2001: 143] and it can be taken to encompass the politics of representation.

But investigating one's location with respect to ensuing knowledge claims does not necessarily make one a standpoint theorist. Although there are points of connection between the politics of location and feminist standpoint theories there are important differences. At the heart of standpoint theory is the proposition that some groups of women occupy marginal positions in dominant power structures and have less stake in them. They therefore have epistemic privilege and can achieve oppositional standpoints from which they can generate more objective (or less false and distorted) accounts of the social world. Prime examples are women of colour and lesbians, whose (multiply) disadvantaged position enables them to analyse more profoundly white supremacy and heterosexism because their survival may depend on the understanding of these structures [Bar On 1993; Wylie 2003].<sup>4</sup> Standpoint theories thus share with the politics of location the assumption that where we are and what we experience shape our thinking and knowledge making. But they differ from the politics of location by focusing not on individual but group locations; by insisting on the epistemic effects not just of social locations but of collectively achieved standpoints of oppositional consciousness; and by claiming that those who are similarly positioned and achieve a common standpoint produce more legitimate forms of knowledge [Collins 1997]. These are also the grounds on which standpoint theories have been criticised. Critics have alleged that they unduly homogenise women who allegedly share a common 'standpoint' and consciousness and ignore their multiple and contradictory locations and geopolitics, and that they are overtly optimistic that those who are marginalised have privileged insights and can articulate less distorted knowledge [Hekman 1997]. Spivak, for example, holds the opposite view that the 'subaltern' cannot speak, or rather, that she cannot be heard because what 'we' in the centre hear has nothing to do with the lives and concerns of the subaltern.

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<sup>4</sup> In her insightful review of feminist standpoint theories Wylie [2003] also addresses the debate of whether standpoint theories are epistemological or methodological theories, a debate that I will not go into here.

In comparison with a politics of location, standpoint theories have thus been perceived as more closely linked to identity politics and less able to capture relative mobility and multiply-placed and multiply-linked subjectivities [Kaplan 2000: 177]. However, like the advocates of a politics of location, proponents of standpoint theory have more recently highlighted the necessity to theorise experiences that arise from and give rise to oppositional agency. Paula Moya, for example, argues that social locations 'profoundly *inform* the contours and the context of both our theories and our knowledge... [without having] epistemic or political meanings in a self-evident way' [Moya 1997: 135-6]. Moya takes up Satya Mohanty's argument that it is not experiences as such but the kinds of interpretations that women make of them that have explanatory value. Experiences are 'inescapably conditioned by the ideologies and "theories" thorough which we view the world' [Moya 1997: 136-7]. Activism is considered one principal generator of alternative constructions and accounts.

Moreover, Nancy Hartstock and Dorothy Smith, early proponents of standpoint theory, now agree that an analysis of relations of power (a central aim of standpoint theorists) can never end with the actors' perspective. Power relations can only be reconstructed on the level of society as a whole [Hartstock 1997; Smith 1997]. As Collins has argued, ideas that are validated from different perspectives generate the most objective accounts [Collins 1989 as cited in Hekman 1997: 353]. This ties in to another important theme in feminist epistemologies and methodologies that bears on the politics of location, namely the commitment to *dialogue and dialogic epistemologies* in making and assessing knowledge claims. Researchers in gender studies often aim to achieve a dialogic approach in which equal salience is given to all voices within a research situation, including 'a dialogue with the aspects of "otherness" within the self' [Henderson 1992: 146]. Both kinds of dialogue can only be approximated when we manage to account for, contextualise and represent our own locations. As Moya put it, 'because differences are relational, our ability to understand an "other" depends largely on our ability to examine our "self"' [Moya 1997: 125-6].

Dialogue among knowledge producers has long been at the heart of the scientific project. But feminists have argued that it can only be fruitful if knowers are differently positioned. Thus Longino [1994] suggests that ongoing criticism of provisional and approximate knowledge claims should be not so much a conversation among members of the same epistemological community but must incorporate different locations within or between epistemic communities – otherwise dialogue is monologue among the same. Haraway states this succinctly, saying that it is because the knowing self is necessarily partial she must enter dialogue and see things 'through somebody else's eyes: to translate knowledges among very different - and power-differentiated - communities' [Haraway 1991: 193]. Thus we can consider the practice of addressing the politics of location as one prerequisite for enabling dialogic epistemologies.

## **5. Outlook**

In this chapter I have advocated the feminist epistemic practice of addressing the politics of location in the research and writing practice (not only) of Central European feminists. Drawing on a wide range of feminist theorists, including Adrienne Rich, Donna Haraway, Chandra Mohanty, Avtar Brah and Rosi Braidotti, I have delineated a psychosocial and an epistemological dimension of the concept, and specified a number of conceptual categories that need to be addressed in order to specify how the structural effects of one's location(s) get embedded in one's epistemological practice. These categories include the location of the knowing subject in terms of social parameters of inequality, subject positions, and desires and investments for

the inquiry of one's psychosocial positionality, and the choice of sites of research, and the use and relations of categories of knowledge for the investigation of one's epistemological manoeuvres.

Taking an essay by Kobena Mercer as an example, I have shown how the acknowledgement and theorising of Mercer's ambivalent structure of feeling with respect to images by Robert Mapplethorpe can force reflection and a more 'holistic' interpretation and evaluation of the author's own emotions, Mapplethorpe's artistic strategy and relationships, and the politics of representation. Addressing his simultaneous complicity and rejection as a reader of Mapplethorpe's art leads Mercer to a relational and dialogic understanding that resists closure and is not integrated, compartmentalised or indifferent.

I have further outlined similarities and differences between the politics of location and related concepts and theories of knowledge. Inquiring into the politics of location is consistent with and can build on the practice of addressing the politics of representation, i.e. specifying the strategies and regimes that enable representation and credibility in a given context. But the practice does not necessarily align its proponents to standpoint theorists, who focus not on the epistemological effects of social locations as such but on collectively achieved standpoints, and tend to assume the epistemic privilege of those who are marginalised.

Finally, attending to the formative aspects of one's location can be considered as a prerequisite for achieving dialogic epistemologies – if the inquiry is thorough and systematic, and self-protective closures can be discarded. As Caren Kaplan has observed in gender studies '[q]uestions of location are most useful ...when they are used to deconstruct any dominant hierarchy or hegemonic use of the term "gender". Location is not useful when it is construed to be the reflection of authentic, primordial identities that are to be re-established and re-affirmed' [Kaplan 2000: 187]. This warning is relevant in the Central and Eastern European context: while a move for embedded and embodied perspectives is necessary to combat the hegemony of Anglo-American women's and gender studies and what Griffin and Braidotti [Braidotti 2002: 2] call the 'one-way lines, from West to East, from the Anglo-American alliance to (the rest of) Europe' of travelling knowledges, a feminist politics of location must resist the construction of homogenised locations and remain committed to the exploration of multiple, relational and mobile positionalities and knowledges.

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